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## SAN FRANCISCO WINE SAMPLING CLUB

### California Zinfandel

The varied local climates in California provide good growing conditions for a large number of grape varieties. Of the many hundred *Vitis vinifera* varieties introduced in California, only a few are widely grown. Zinfandel has been most adaptable and is grown in all wine districts from the most northern vineyards in Mendocino County to those south of Los Angeles in Cucamonga. In 1960, 25,071 out of the total 85,750 vineyard acres in red wine varieties were Zinfandel. For a proper perspective, the position of Zinfandel must be viewed in relation to other varieties.

The finest California varietal wines are grown in the northern counties of Santa Clara, Alameda, Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino. At least 25 red grape varieties are grown in these northern California coastal counties. Varietal wines are made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Petit Sirah, Gamay (Napa), Gamay Beaujolais, Barbara, Carignane, Charbono, Ruby Cabernet, and Grignolino. The Cabernet Sauvignon grape makes the finest of the California red varietal wines. The Pinot Noir grape, which makes such elegant wines in Burgundy, does not achieve the same quality of wine in California. (The use of new wine-making techniques such as controlled malo-lactic fermentation, aging in new French oak barrels, limited yield per acre, and harvesting at the peak of grape flavor, may eventually produce great Pinot Noir varietal wines in California.) Wines from other red grape varieties do not achieve the depth of flavor, complexity and elegance of the wines from these two premium varieties.

Zinfandel grapes make a light, berry-perfumed, racy wine that is inexpensive and easy to drink - especially when the wine is young. These pleasant, tangy qualities have made Zinfandel wine the most popular and typical wine of California. At the present time, no other wine grape variety is planted as widely throughout the state nor has as large a vineyard area or volume of production. California produces no wine from a native grape, but Zinfandel is an original California wine. No similar old world grape variety has been found. Zinfandel is also versatile and makes good California port wine, a delightful rosé, and is useful for blending with wines of less character from high yield (tons per acre) grapes such as Carignane, Petit Sirah, or Mission. It is also a wine that is easily mass produced; Italian Swiss Colony makes over 100,000 gallons per year that sells for 80-90¢ per bottle.

During the early 1800's the Mission grape, introduced by the Padres, dominated California vineyards. Wines from the Mission grape lack character, and are difficult to make into good dry wines because these grapes lack acid. Probably the best wine made from Mission grapes is Angelica. This sweet wine originated in early California and is three parts Mission grape juice and one part brandy. In 1876 phylloxera wiped out many vineyards. On replanting with phylloxera resistant root stock, Zinfandel was the popular varietal. Many of these Zinfandel plantings survived the period of Prohibition because these grapes were popular for home wine making. The current trend is to plant premium varieties which can produce the best white and red table wines.

The popularity of Zinfandel may be waning. Viticultural difficulties such as irregular ripening, tendency to raisin, and bunch rot, have caused the University of California Agricultural Extension Service to recommend the planting of Zinfandel only in Region I. In this region it competes for vineyard space with premium grape varieties since Region I climatic conditions are best for Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and White Riesling. Since 1960 the acreage planted in premium varieties has doubled. In 1968 there were 1395 acres of Cabernet and 600 acres of Pinot Noir in the northern coastal counties. The 6275 acres of Zinfandel is however still much larger. Other large plantings are Carignane (5738 acres) and Petite Sirah (2595 acres). The premium varieties have a low yield, 3.5 to 4.5 tons per acre. Zinfandel is a little better, 4 to 5 tons per acre. But Carignane and Petite Sirah yield 8 to 10 tons per acre. In the past, high yield varieties have often brought a better return to the grower than the premium, low yield grape. Currently wineries are paying a disproportionately high price for premium varieties and therefore new plantings are more likely to be in these varieties.

The origin of Zinfandel is uncertain. It is of the species *Vitis vinifera* and therefore from Europe. A generally accepted story is that it was among the cuttings received by Count Harasthy in 1852; the shipment was supposedly from his homeland of Hungary. Count Harasthy was an enthusiastic early (1851 to 1864 in California) promoter for wine growing in California and is often referred to as the "father of California viticulture". However no identical old world representative of this variety has been reported.

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#### Wine Description

The Zinfandel wines tasted are summarized in the table given on the last page. The tastings are listed by date (month and year) and extend over a two year period. Prices have changed appreciably during that time. The wines in each tasting are listed in order of preference, but at the quality level assigned. This facilitates the comparison of wines in different tastings, and cross correlation is improved by the number of wines that were retasted. In the quality numbering system, 10 is perfect and 5 is an average wine.

Zinfandel wines vary in style. The style is both dependent on the quality of grape available and on the type of wine the winemaker sets out to make. Most Zinfandel wines are between two extremes in style. One style is light, generously fruity in aroma, fresh, brisk, and clean in taste. It has the perfume of raspberries and currants and a briary indefinable scent. The color is a beautiful brilliant red. It is refreshing and delightful to drink while young. It does not age well, and like many Beaujolais (the two wines have similar qualities) it should be drunk before the wine is three or four years old. After this time it begins to lose its fine aromatic fruity character and is not as pleasant. These wines are never great, and in our scale of 10, the best would rate about 7 in quality.

The other extreme in style is a big, heavy, intense wine with great body and substance. It is a black-toned deep red in color. The wine has such an abundance of flavor and aroma that the taste is unresolved. It is often slightly sweet and always tannic. When at their best, wines of this type profit by aging. In some wineries six or more years in large wooden tanks has been used. The '44 Nervo (see the 5/68 tasting) has been held in a large redwood tank. In other wineries

\* G. Husmann, "Grape Culture & Wine Making in Calif.", Payot, Upham & Co, 1888 p.152.

V. P. Carosso, "The California Wine Industry 1830-1895", U.C. Press, 1951 pp.40, 76, 179.

A. J. Winkler, "General Viticulture", U.C. Press, 1962 p. 595.

a shorter time in small cooperage is used. The wine distributed had about two years in 60 gallon French oak barrels. The French oak adds new elements of taste to Zinfandel.

The best Zinfandel of those tasted was the '57 Parducci (3/69). This is a rare 12 year old wine that is perfectly bottle aged. This bottle was a gift from John Parducci. Other good aged wines were the 1960 Buena Vista (10/67) and the non-vintaged Cadenasso (5/68). Both these wines were picked by perceptive connoisseurs for aging in their cellars. Some aged Zinfandels were not as good in quality. The '44 Nervo (5/68) has been most of its life in a large redwood tank (17,000 gallon); it is somewhat acetic and woody. The '35 Simi (7/69) is a tremendously pungent wine with a tarry-creosote quality that dominates its flavor. This flavor is not too pleasing but may age out. This wine was bottled for the old Hotel del Monte shortly after the repeal of Prohibition.

The typical Zinfandel may range in color from a light to a medium-dark ruby red, but it should have a generous aroma that carries the perfume scents of raspberries and currants. To the palate, the wine should be light and refreshing, dry and well balanced, spicy with pleasing flavors, and brisk and fresh in its finish. In all the wines tasted, no one wine completely fits this description. The '66 Parducci has a good and ample aroma but is rather too big and full to be termed a light wine. The '66 Souverain lacks aroma but has a fine crisp balance. The '66 Louis M. Martini has a medium aroma and is a fairly full hard wine. The '66 and '67 Krug wines are very similar, with an ample perfumed aroma that does not seem to be all Zinfandel. The '67 Ingelnook has a good aroma but is not well balanced.

The above wines are good examples of the \$1.50 to \$2.00 class of wines. For a very inexpensive wine of good quality, Italian Swiss Colony at 82¢ is quite satisfactory. Another good inexpensive wine is the Vin Rosso of d'Agostini for 63¢; this wine is not from Zinfandel grapes but is a mixture of Carignane and Mission. The least expensive good wine which is mostly Zinfandel, is the Wente Claret; if this wine is purchased by the gallon, a fifth of a gallon (normal bottle volume) is only 37¢.

Now examine the wine distributed. It is the 1966 vintage, unfinned, Robert Mondavi Winery, Napa Valley Zinfandel. It is not a typical Zinfandel because an aging technique new to California was used. The wine started as a full-flavored, big, tannic wine and was aged in French Nevers oak barrels for about two years before bottling. This resulted in a very palatable, complex and interesting wine of exceedingly good quality.

"Unfinned" in this case means the wine was not given a finishing treatment with a fining agent. Fining is used to clarify wine, to make wine smoother tasting, and to prevent solids from sedimenting after bottling. Other clarifying treatments are "racking" and "filtration". After fermentation, a wine is cloudy with yeast cells and other suspended material. These solids are allowed to settle, and the wine drawn off to a fresh container leaving the sediment behind. This operation is called "racking". This is usually repeated several times. However all colloidal sized particles may not agglomerate and settle. Fining and filtration are therefore used in conjunction with racking. Generally a fining agent is added

after the first racking to hasten clarification. Two major classes of materials are used as fining agents - proteins and adsorbants. The proteins coagulate, forming a flocculant precipitate that both adsorbs and coprecipitates with the colloidal particles in the wine. The proteins used include egg white, gelatin, fresh blood, isinglass, and casein. The adsorbants are Bentonite (a clay-like mineral), Kaolin, and Spanish clay. The amount of fining and filtration should be a minimum since some of the compounds removed contribute to wine flavor.

The wine distributed was fined with Bentonite after the first racking. There were nine barrels. Darrel Corti of Corti Brothers Markets in Sacramento purchased the wine in three of the barrels and at his request these were not given the egg white fining and the heavy filtering used on the wine in five of the other barrels. Esquin Imports also bought one barrel of unfined wine. Only a rough filtering was used in bottling the "unfined" wine. In comparative blind tastings, the "unfined" wine has been consistently preferred to the "fined" wine and to other California Zinfandels. However the "fined" wine is a big, rich, elegant Zinfandel but not as "gutsy" nor as promising as the "unfined".

Now taste the wine distributed. Have it at room temperature or slightly below. In the glass it is a rich, deep, dark ruby red that has a black tone. The wine is not bright but is clear and has a slightly blue tinge at the liquid edge. It is expected that on bottle aging a sediment will develop.

The odor is very generous. The aroma has a blackberry-, current-like perfumed scent. Vanilla-like, woody odors from the oak are prominent along with alcoholic winery scents. This is a fairly complex nose and not typical of the briary, brisk, fruity odors expected in a Zinfandel. This wine has the lush, rich odors of a wine that should be aged.

On tasting, a certain lack of sapidity in flavor and loss in fruitiness is noticed. The woody somewhat stemmy characteristics found in the odor are now more prominent. The roughness of the wine is very evident and the gross substance in the wine coats the tongue and mouth. It is a mouth filling wine, very full, big in body, high in alcohol, astringent, medium in acidity, and would be better balanced if higher in sugar content.

After the wine has been in the mouth a short while, and after swallowing, a very bitter flavor is noticed. These flavors are intense and not all of the sort usually attributed to tannin compounds. Good flavors linger suggesting berry and current perfumes again, but the coarse qualities of the wine prevent, at present, the development of clean, fresh sensations. The finish of this wine is heavy-handed but pleasant.

In summary this is a very big wine for a Zinfandel. It is not typical in flavor and is more complex because of aging in French oak barrels. It has a very forceful impact on the taste senses, and a coarse thickness which is unpleasant now but will age out. In balance, the wine is too tart, but with five to ten years of bottle aging it will become pleasant. Then it may be a very great wine. The aging of Zinfandel in French oak must be considered, at present, as a promising experiment.

# CALIFORNIA ZINFANDEL WINES \* SENSORY EVALUATION RESULTS

(The ratings were obtained in "blind" tastings; the wines are listed in order of ranking)

Quality Rating	10/67	5/68	2/69	3/69	6/69	7/69
8+				'57 Parducci NA		
8			'66 Mondavi U \$2.90 '66 Mondavi F 2.25 '66 Inglenook 1.79 '65 Inglenook 1.79		'65 Mondavi U \$2.90	
8-	'60 Buena Vista \$1.80			'64 Inglenook E \$2.50		'66 Inglenook E \$2.50
7+		NV Cadenasso \$0.75	'66 L. Martini 1.89 '64 Parducci 1.81	NV Heitz 1.79 '66 L. Martini 1.89	'66 Parducci U 1.81	
7	'62 L. Martini 1.70 '64 Inglenook E 2.50		'66 Krug 1.59 '66 Mirasso 2.00	'66 Souverain 2.00 '66 Krug 1.59	'64 Parducci U 1.81	
7-	'65 L. Martini 1.70	NV York 1.00		NV Sebastiani 2.00 NV Wiebel 1.50	'66 Krug 1.79	
6+		'63 Inglenook 1.49 NV D. Rynum 1.09	'66 Souverain 2.00	NV Gemello 1.25	'67 Inglenook E 1.90 '65 Simi NA '67 Krug 1.79 '57 Souverain 2.00	'67 Souverain 2.00
6	NV Souverain* 2.00	NV Italian Swiss 0.79 NV Buena Vista 1.68	NV Italian Swiss 0.82	'64 Inglenook V. 1.59	NV d'Agostini Vin Rosso 0.63	
6-		NV Wente, Claret 0.37		NV Buena Vista 1.89		'64 Inglenook V 1.87
5	'63 L. Martini 1.70 '65 Krug 1.50	'64 L. Martini 1.30 NV Nervo 0.69 '44 Nervo 2.00	'64 Inglenook 1.59 '65 D. Bruce 4.00 NV C. K. Mondavi 0.89	'65 D. Bruce 4.00 ? Bargetto's 1.50 '65 Ridge 2.50		'64 Brueger ? NV Beringer 1.40 NV Cadenasso 1.00
4		NV Beringer 1.40	'65 Ridge 2.50	NV Italian Swiss* 0.82 ? Cresta Blanca 1.75		NV Wooden Valley 0.50
3		? Mirasso 2.00 '64 Krug, Claret 1.49 NV Souverain* 2.00				
2	NV Wiebel 1.50					
0-1				NV Beringer 1.40 ? Wheeler 4.00		

\*'65 bottle  
Key: NV, nonvintaged; NA, not available for purchase now; U, unfined; F, fined; E, Estate bottled; V, vintaged.  
Please refer to Sunset's "California Wine Country" publication by Bob Thompson for the location of the wineries.

\*Bad bottle?